

CHAPTER IX

Communication: A Verbal and Nonverbal Process of Making Requests of the Receiver

1. When judging whether a communication is clear, one must also remember that people communicate in a variety of ways in addition to using words.
 - a. A person simultaneously communicates by his gestures, facial expression, body posture and movement, tone of voice, and even by the way he is dressed.
 - b. And all this communication occurs within a context. When does it take place? Where? With whom? Under what circumstances? What is the contract between the persons carrying on the interchange?
2. Because of all these factors, communication is a complex business. The receiver must assess all the different ways in which the sender is sending messages, as well as being aware of his own receiving system, that is, his own interpretation system.
 - a. When A talks, B assesses the verbal meaning of A's message.
 - b. He also listens to the tone of voice in which A speaks.

- c. He also watches what A does; he notes the "body language" and facial expressions which accompany A's message.
 - d. He also assesses what A is saying within a social context. The context may be how B has seen A respond to him and to others in the past. It may also be B's expectations about what the requirements of the situation are.
 - e. In other words, the receiver (B) is busy assessing both the verbal and the nonverbal content of A's message so that he can come to some judgment about what A meant by his communication.
3. What A meant by his communication can be said to have at least two levels:
- a. *The denotative level*: the literal content.
 - b. *The metacommunicative level*: a comment on the literal content as well as on the nature of the relationship between the persons involved.
4. Animals other than man can send metacommunications. For example, as Gregory Bateson describes it:
- a. Cats may go through all their battery of fighting motions yet at the same time withhold their claws.
 - b. By this metacommunication the cat clues other cats as well as people to the fact that he is not "really" fighting; he is playing at fighting (22).
5. Metacommunication is a message *about* a message.
- a. It conveys the sender's attitude toward the message he just sent: "The message I sent was a friendly one."
 - b. It conveys the sender's attitude toward himself: "I am a friendly person."
 - c. It conveys the sender's attitude, feelings, intentions

toward the receiver: "I see you as someone to be friendly with."

6. Humans are especially versatile at metacommunication.
 - a. Humans, like other animals, can send nonverbal metacommunications. But the variety of these is wide; humans can frown, grimace, smile, stiffen, slump. And the context in which humans communicate is, itself, one way of communicating.
 - b. As a matter of fact, humans cannot communicate without, at the same time, metacommunicating. Humans cannot *not* metacommunicate.
 - c. Humans can also send verbal metacommunications. They can verbally explain their message-sending.
7. When a person verbally explains his message-sending, he is thus denotatively speaking at a metacommunicative level. And these verbal metacommunications are, themselves, at various abstraction levels.
 - a. A person can label what kind of message he sent telling the receiver how seriously he wishes him to receive it and how he should respond to it. He can say:

"It was a joke." (laugh at it)

"It was just a passing remark" (ignore it)

"It was a question." (answer it)

"It was a request." (consider it)

"It was an order." (obey it)
 - b. He can say why he sent the message, by referring to what the other did.

"You hit me. So I hit you back."

"You were kind to me. I was returning the favor."

- c. He can say why he sent the message, by referring to what he thinks the other's wishes, feelings, intentions toward him are.

"I thought you were mad and were going to hurt me."

"I thought you were tired and wanted me to help you."

"I thought you were discouraged and wanted me to reassure you."

- d. He can say why he sent the message by referring to a request made by the other:

"You were ordering me to do something, and I don't take orders."

"You were requesting something from me, and I was considering it."

- e. He can say why he sent the message by referring to the kind of response which he was trying to elicit from the other:

"I was trying to get your goat."

"I was trying to get you to love me."

"I was trying to get you to talk."

"I was trying to make you laugh."

"I was trying to get you to agree with me."

- f. He can say why he sent the message by specifically referring to what he was trying to get the other to do or say or *not* do and *not* say:

"I wanted you to go to the store for me."

"I was asking you to phone her for me."

"I was asking you to leave the room."

"I didn't want you to tell her about my illness."

"I wanted you to tell him that I was home."

8. Since humans can "metacommunicate" both verbally and nonverbally, they can give the receiver quite an assortment of messages to sort and weigh, as he tries to figure out what is meant by the communication.
 - a. Perhaps A makes the following denotative statement:
"The dog is on the couch."
 - b. He automatically comments, nonverbally, on this statement, by the irritable tone in which he makes it.
 - c. He can then verbally explain what he meant by what he said. Out of the welter of choices, he may say: "I wanted you to take the dog off the couch."
9. The receiver of these messages (B) must balance what A said, with how he said it, with what he then said about it.
 - a. B balances the nonverbal and the verbal metacommunications (within the context) and compares them to the denotative statement.
 - b. If they are all congruent (seem to jibe with each other) he has little difficulty in deciding that A meant what he said he meant.
 - c. Whether or not they jibe, he will attend more to the nonverbal metacommunications and to context than he will to the verbal metacommunications. For one thing, the nonverbal is a less clear or explicit communication, so it requires greater attention.
10. Whenever a person communicates he is not only making a statement, he is also asking something of the receiver and trying to influence the receiver to give him what he wants. This is the "command aspect" of a message. Such requests, however, may have various degrees of explicitness and intensity.

- a. The sender may be simply asking the receiver to show, by response, that his message was heard: "Just listen to me."
 - b. Or he may be asking for a specific kind of response: "Tell me where the store is" or, "Go to the store for me."

- 11. The receiver, in turn, must respond, because people cannot *not* communicate.
 - a. Even if the receiver remains silent, he is still communicating.
 - b. And, incidentally, symptoms are one way of communicating in a nonverbal way.

- 12. But even though all messages have requests in them, they are not always expressed verbally. Thus, the receiver must rely on metacommunications for his clues as to what the sender wants. He asks himself:
 - a. What is the sender verbally saying?
 - b. What, specifically, is he requesting? Is the request fully expressed at the denotative level?
 - c. If not, perhaps the way in which he communicates and the context in which he is communicating will give me clues to what he is asking of me.

- 13. If the communication, or message, and the metacommunication or meta-message do not fit, the receiver must somehow translate this into a single message. In order to do this satisfactorily he needs to be able to comment on the presence of the discrepancy. Let us take a trivial example. A husband who is working on a household fixture says, in an irritable tone, "Damn it, the fixture broke!" The

wife, in this relationship, may go through the following process (with greater agility and speed, of course, than the snail's pace described here):

- a. He is telling me about the condition of the electrical fixture he is working on.
 - b. But he is doing more than that. He is telling me that he is irritated. His "Damn it," along with his tone, helps me decide this.
 - c. Is he criticizing me? Is he telling me that I am responsible for the condition of the fixture?
 - d. If he is criticizing me, what does he want me to do? Take over the job for him? Apologize? Or what?
 - e. Or is he criticizing himself, irritated that he is having a frustrating time with the job, and that he only has himself to blame for the fact that the fixture broke?
 - f. If he is primarily criticizing himself, what is he asking me to do? Sympathize with him? Listen to him? Or what?
 - g. I know, from living with him, that he prides himself on his tool dexterity and that he considers electrical maintenance his special forte. Evidently, his view of himself is being put to the test. So he must be criticizing himself. And he must primarily be asking me to sympathize with him.
 - h. But sympathize *how*? Does he want me to help him with the job, bring him coffee, or what? What behavior on my part that he could see and hear would mean to him that I am sympathizing with him?
14. Let us take another example. A husband says, in an irritable tone, "The dog is on the couch." The wife, in this relationship, may go through the following process:
- a. He is telling me where the dog is.
 - b. But he is doing more than that. He sounds irritated.

- c. Why is he telling me about his irritation? Is he criticizing me for the fact that the dog is on the couch?
 - d. If he is not criticizing me, what does he want me to do? Just listen to him? Sympathize with his irritation? Take the dog off the couch? Or what?
 - e. I wanted a dog. He didn't. I went ahead and got one without his agreement. Now, when he shows his irritation at the dog, he is complaining about what I did. He is criticizing me for disobeying him. He undoubtedly wants me to take the dog off the couch, but does he also want me to get rid of the dog and apologize to him for going against his wishes?
15. Let us return to the first example. Instead of saying, "Damn it, the fixture broke", the husband could say, "Damn it, I'm having a hard time with this job. Bring me a cup of coffee." The wife, in this case, would have little trouble assessing his message. He would be telling her overtly what he wanted from her and why. In other words, his request that she sympathize with him by bringing coffee would be clear.
16. In the second example, instead of saying, "The dog is on the couch," the husband could say, "Take the dog off the couch and get rid of him. You never should have bought a dog. I told you I didn't want one." The wife in this case would have little trouble assessing his message.
- a. He would be telling her specifically what he wanted from her and why. In other words, his request that she agree to obey him would be clear.
 - b. In both cases, the wife is still in the position of deciding whether or not to agree to her husband's request that she obey him. But at least she is in no doubt about what it really is that her husband wants of her.
17. In other words, the request, which is part of every message, may or may not be expressed denotatively. And there are degrees to which requests can be spelled out denotatively.

- a. "Damn it, the fixture broke," and "The dog is on the couch," are very indirect requests, requests not expressed at the denotative level.
 - b. "Bring me a cup of coffee," and "Take the dog off the couch and get rid of him," are direct requests, requests expressed at the denotative level.
 - c. Or, if these specific requests had been expressed at a more abstract level, they would also be direct: "Sympathize with me" or "Do what I want."
18. However, all messages, when viewed at their highest abstraction level can be characterized as "Validate me" messages. These are frequently interpreted as "Agree with me," "Be on my side," "Validate me by sympathizing with me," or, "Validate me by showing me you value me and my ideas."
19. When people communicate, they rarely go around verbally requesting that others agree with them or requesting that others want what they want. They don't, because they are forced by the wish to be valued, and by the wish for cooperation, to persuade or at least try to elicit the wished-for response. Many persons feel embarrassed about their wish to get validation from outside themselves.
- a. As I have said, communication is a necessarily incomplete process. But we can now see why this process becomes even more incomplete than pure logic or inadequacy of words would dictate.
 - b. Incomplete (indirect) communication can serve many interpersonal purposes which are not necessarily dysfunctional.
 - It can help camouflage such requests.
 - It can prevent embarrassment in case one's requests (of any kind) are refused.
20. Up to now, I have been discussing the problems posed for human receivers by the complexity and the incompleteness of human communication.

- a. Just because this communication *is* complex and incomplete to differing degrees, all receivers are required to fill in or complete the sender's message by clairvoyance or guesswork.
 - b. Receivers can and do achieve this, sometimes with amazing accuracy, considering all the fancy footwork they have to go through.
 - c. But there are times when even the most clairvoyant of receivers guesses incorrectly. When this happens, the sender's next message usually lets him know his error.
21. The messages I have listed in this chapter have all been relatively *congruent* within the context; they have jibed with each other.
- a. A congruent communication is one where two or more messages are sent via different levels but none of these messages seriously contradicts any other. For example, the husband says, "The dog is on the couch," in an irritable tone, in a context which tells the wife that he is irritated and why he is irritated.
 - b. An incongruent communication is one where two or more messages, sent via different levels, seriously do contradict each other. One level of communication is context itself. For example, the husband says, in a delighted tone, that the dog is on the couch, but from the context the wife knows that he hates dogs; whether they are on couches or anywhere else.
22. Simple contradictory communication is where two or more messages are sent in a sequence via the same communication level and oppose each other.
- a. Perhaps A says the following:
 - "Come here . . . No, go away."
 - "I love you . . . No, I hate you."
 - "I'm happy . . . No, I'm sad."

"My wife is tall . . . No, my wife is short."

- b. Perhaps A does the following:
 - Pushes B away. Pulls B back.
 - Buys a ticket to the movie, but doesn't go see it.
 - Puts his coat on, then takes it off.
23. But such simple contradictions cannot occur without some accompanying metacommunication, since one cannot *not* metacommunicate.
- a. Although the self-contradictions listed above are relatively clear, they are also accompanied by smiles or frowns or tone of voice, and in a context.
 - b. When contradictions occur between different levels of communication, they become *incongruent*.*
24. Messages differ in the degree to which they are incongruent. Relatively simple incongruent communication sounds and looks like this:
- a. A says, "It's cold in here," and takes off his coat.
 - b. A says, "I hate you," and smiles.
 - c. A wears an evening dress to a funeral.
 - d. A wears tennis shoes to a board of directors' meeting.
 - e. A says, "Come closer, darling," and then stiffens.
25. Incongruent communication can become even more so when the sender's nonverbal metacommunication does not jibe with his verbal metacommunication.
- a. The sender may say "Come closer, darling," then stiffen, and then say, "I want to make love."

*"Incongruent" refers to a discrepancy between the report and the command aspects of a message; for the system for analyzing this devised by Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland, see 23, 32, 37, and 40 in the bibliography.

- In this case, should the receiver respond to the sender's denotative statement ("Come closer, darling.")?
 - Or should he respond to the sender's nonverbal statement (the stiffness)?
 - Or should he respond to the sender's words explaining his intentions ("I want to make love.")?
 - This is called being presented with a double-level message.
- b. As usual, the receiver relies heavily on context, and on the nonverbal signals to help him in his clairvoyance process. In this case, the nonverbal signals and the context contradict each other. But, being an especially trusting and courageous receiver, he says to himself:

"Let's see. The sender and I are courting. Yet other people are around.

"I have learned from past experience with the sender that she is nervous about showing amorous feelings publicly. But that doesn't mean she doesn't have amorous feelings toward me.

"I will live dangerously and ignore her nonverbal metacommunication in this case. I will rely on context alone and accept her verbally-stated intention.

"In other words, her verbal statement 'I want to make love' carries greater weight with me. All I do is add to it the proviso which she did not add: '. . . but other people are around, so I am just nervous.' In other words, the sender is willing to be nervous, with a little assistance."

- c. The freedom to comment and question immediately takes the receiver out of the clairvoyant dilemma. When this freedom is not present, the chances for misunderstanding are great. In the case of a child, as we have seen, there is a likelihood that such messages will be built up to the point where a "double bind" occurs (see page 36).

26. Incongruent communication like that just described puts an extra burden on the receiver. But, whether or not the sender's message is incongruent, the receiver can still go through various checking-out procedures in order to find out what is being reported, what requested, and why.
- a. For example, when the wife heard her husband say, in an irritable tone, "Damn it, the fixture broke," she could have decided that she still didn't have enough data, even from the content of the message, to find out what her husband was requesting from her and why.
 - b. She might have gone to where he was and stood there for a minute, continuing to pick up clues from him.
 - If she had done this, she would, of course, have been communicating with him. By her presence she would be saying: "I heard you. I am attending."
 - He would also continue to communicate with her, as he jabbed at the fixture, grunted, sighed, etc.
 - c. The wife might then have asked, "Is there anything I can do?"
 - The minute she did this, she would be asking her husband to be specific in what he was requesting.
 - Perhaps he would have said, "No, I just have to work it out."
 - By this response, the wife would have succeeded in narrowing her unknowns. She would now be more certain that he was distressed with himself but she still could not be sure what he specifically wanted from her. Did he want her to listen? Attend? Sympathize?
 - d. The wife might go on to ask, "Would you like a cup of coffee?" And he might answer, "Yes, damn it, I would." The communication sequence would now be relatively closed or complete. (Of course, it is more complete if she actually brings the coffee!)
27. If, instead, the wife had been fairly confident about her clairvoyance, she might have simply assumed that she knew what his implied request was. She might have put it in words herself and seen how he responded.

- a. She could have asked outright, "Would you like a cup of coffee?" and he might have said, "Yes, damn it, I would." If she had guessed correctly enough, the sequence would have been relatively closed.¹
 - b. But he might have said, "Hell, no, what would I want coffee for, at a time like this?" Then she would have known that her clairvoyance process wasn't working very well. She would have been required to check out further, perhaps by going through the clue-getting procedures already described.
28. Receivers vary in their ability to perceive the needs and wishes of others.
- a. Although all receivers put great weight on the metacommunicative aspects, they vary in their ability to assess what the sender is asking of them.
 - The wife may mistake her husband's irritation with himself for a criticism of her, and end up trying to take over the job for him instead of sympathizing with him.
 - The wife may mistake her husband's criticism of her for irritation over the specific behavior of the dog, and end up trying to sympathize with him instead of taking the dog off the couch or getting rid of the dog.
 - The lover, in the third example, may mistake the woman's stiffening for distaste, and end up rejecting her instead of making love.
 - b. We even have psychiatric labels for people who are not able to accurately weigh a message for its meaning. They are not able to guess attitudes, intentions, feelings (as expressed in metacommunication) accurately.
 - c. If this wife, in all contexts, in all relationships, and at all times within a relationship, decides that senders are criticizing her or praising her, we would readily label her paranoid or egocentric.
 - d. Also, although receivers put great weight on the metacommunicative aspects to help tell them what the sender is requesting, they vary in their ability to attend to denotation in spite of, or along with,

metacommunication. For example, perhaps a person attends a lecture for the purpose of receiving denotative content from the speaker. But perhaps the speaker speaks in such a frightened tone that the receiver cannot hear what the speaker is saying because he is so concerned about the speaker's fright.

29. Senders vary in their ability to send clear requests, so that the receiver has to guess as little as possible.

- a. For example, let us say that a wife wants to see a movie with her husband. If she communicates in a functional way, she might say, "Let's see a movie," or, more overtly, "I would like to see a movie with you."
- b. But, if she communicates in a dysfunctional way, she might say any of the following things:

"You would like to see a movie, *wouldn't* you."

"It would do you good to see a movie."

"If you want to see a movie, we'll see one."

"We might as well see a movie. It's Saturday night."

"There's a new movie house down the street."

"My voices are ordering me to see a movie."

30. These are some of the covert ways in which this wife can request something from her husband without acknowledging that she is making a request.

- a. She does not clearly label her wish which is behind her request, as *her* wish.
- b. Or, she may fail to label her wish *as a wish*. It becomes not a wish but a "must," something one is commanded to do. (The commander may be the other person or people in general, or "one's duty" or "voices" or something foreign inside of the self.)

- c. Or, she may label her wish as not a wish but as “the lesser of two evils.”

31. The husband, in this case, could do some checking out. He could say: “Do *you* want to see a movie?” or “Do you want to see a movie *with me*?”

- a. But here is what can happen if the husband does ask his wife what she meant by her communication. She might go on to explain her message in any one of the following statements:

“No, I thought *you* wanted to go.”

“No, I just thought we *should*.”

“No, I don’t necessarily want to go. I want to do what you want.”

“There are times when I want to see a movie, but this isn’t one of them.”

“I don’t particularly want to go. My voices are ordering me.”

32. By denying that she had a wish, the wife is also denying that her wish was expressed toward her husband. She denies that she has made a request of him. If he pursues his questions, she may go on to deny further.

“You can go or not. I don’t care.”

“If you want to be a stay-at-home, that’s your business.”

“If you go to the movies, you go to the movies.”

“Nobody asked you to go. If you want to go, then go.”

33. The wife, when replying to her husband’s request (in this case, a request to clarify), denies any or all parts of her message.

- a. The Bateson group, and Jay Haley, in particular, has defined four parts of every message:
 - I (the sender)
 - am saying something (message)
 - to you (the receiver)
 - in this situation (context) (33).
- b. All messages are requests, yet the wife may deny this, in so many words, by saying:

“I didn’t care one way or the other.” (*I didn’t request anything.*)

“I just threw out a suggestion for whatever it was worth.” (*I didn’t request anything.*)

“Whether or not you go to the movies is immaterial to me.” (*I didn’t request anything of you.*)

“At one time, I might have wanted to go with you. But I know better now.” (*I didn’t request anything of you just now.*)

34. We note how defensive the wife is, as she sends her highly incomplete message. (These messages are incomplete because they do not clearly label “*I, want this, from you, in this situation.*”) She makes it hard for her husband to find out what she wants.

- a. She covers herself as she sends her request, almost as though she anticipated refusal.

“Voices are ordering me . . .”

“I am doing this for you . . .”

“There’s a new movie house down the street.”

- b. She covers herself after she is asked to clarify: “I thought *you* wanted *me* to go,” or, “Nobody asked *you* to go.”

35. We also note how offensive the wife is, as she sends her request and responds to requests to clarify. She makes it hard for her husband to want to do what she wants.

- a. She disparages him in anticipation of refusal:

"A person should see a movie at least once a month if he professes to be cultured."

"We might as well see a movie. I'm bored."

- b. She disparages him after he asks her to clarify (and this very disparagement reveals her disappointment over the fact that he does not seem influenceable):

"I can't *make* you do anything."

"You'll do exactly what you *feel* like doing."

"Ask anything of you? I know better!"

36. One could decide, on first thought, that this wife is a dysfunctional communicator and that she puts unnecessary burdens on her functional husband who, in this case, tries to check out the meaning of her message.
- a. But when people communicate, they are sending a message to a receiver.
 - b. The wife tailors her message to the way she thinks her husband will respond to it.
 - c. Once we note how he does respond to her, we will see that her messages are tailored to a kind of response which she has learned to expect from her husband.
 - d. Her husband, in his response, does the same.
37. One cannot view messages separate from interaction, as I have been doing, and receive the full picture.
- a. One must at least note what A says, how B responds, how A responds to B's response. Communication is a two-sided affair; senders are receivers, receivers are also senders.

- b. One must note whether or not these interaction sequences repeat themselves over time and in different content areas.
 - c. If they do repeat themselves, these sequences represent how these two people characteristically communicate with one another.
38. However, before analyzing interaction, one can profit from analyzing isolated messages. Such an analysis:
- a. Highlights' different principles about messages and message-sending.
 - b. Highlights the kinds of problems which highly defensive communication poses for the receiver.
 - c. Helps document inferences about what inner wishes and fears dictate and how they perpetuate dysfunctional communication.
39. This husband's communication does have something to do with the wife's characteristic way of asking for something from him.
- a. But even before analyzing this, we can guess that this wife fears that her husband will reject her request.
 - b. Behind her denials that she has a wish and has made a request, is the wish that her husband would not only want to go to the movies with her, but would want to do what she wants because he loves her: "You'll do what you *feel* like doing".
 - c. She is not unusual in having this want. But if she cannot come to terms with it, she can easily trap herself and her husband in an impossible dilemma.
 - No two people think alike on everything.
 - No two people feel the same way at all times within a relationship.
 - No two people want the same things or want them at the same time. People operate from different timetables.

- We are, in fact, autonomous, different, and unique beings.
- Yet we are, at the same time, dependent on others. We need them to help us get many of the things we want (or not prevent us from getting them). We are also dependent on others to validate our existence and worth.

40. Therefore, even though people are making requests of others when they communicate, there are some things that cannot be requested. Yet these are the very things people also want.

- a. We cannot ask that others feel as we do or as we want them to. As Bateson and Watzlawick have pointed out, feelings are spontaneous; they are not subject to self-request or to the requests of others (22, 138).
 - All we can do is try to elicit feelings.
 - Failing to elicit, we can accept our disappointment and try again.
- b. We cannot ask that others think as we do. Thoughts are not subject to the requests of others.
 - All we can do is try to persuade others, and present our arguments in the clearest, most cogent form possible.
 - Failing to persuade, we can accept our disappointment and compromise, or “agree to disagree.”
- c. We can, of course, *demand* that others say or do (or not say or not do) what we want. But if we succeed in this, our success will be questionable.
 - We shall have validated our power but not our lovability or worth, since we have “had to ask.”
 - Also, since such a tactic challenges the other’s autonomy, it is likely that he will feel devalued and will devalue back.

41. Evidently man is insatiable. He can never be loved enough, valued enough. Yet he can never be safe enough, powerful enough.

- a. These two wants are contradictory if viewed on the same continuum. Man seems to have a built-in potential for defeating himself.
 - If he sees these two wants as an either/or proposition, he puts them in conflict with each other and loses out on both.
 - If he allows them to coexist, each in its proper time and place, he will not only gain both, but will find that each enhances the other.

- b. The way he communicates with other persons will take its form from whichever of these two approaches he adopts.
 - If he takes the first approach, it indicates that he will handle the different-ness of others in terms of *war* and *who is right*.
 - If he takes the second, he will handle different-ness on the basis of *exploration* and *what fits*.
 - The former leads to stalemating, retardation and pathology.
 - The latter leads to growth, individuality and creativity.

- c. In the next chapter, I shall be going into this question of how dysfunctional and functional communication express and influence pathology and health.